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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Chernenko: A Preliminary Assessment
of the Man and His Policy Agenda

Summary

Konstantin Chernenko has staged a remarkable political comeback, but he lacks some of the institutional strengths that Brezhnev and Andropov could claim at their accession. We still do not know what political tradeoffs have been struck that enabled Chernenko to get the top job. Chernenko must look first to consolidating his position, but a lack of vacancies at the top and other significant political constraints dictate that he move with caution. [redacted]

In the next few months, he will be compelled to grapple with a host of complex domestic and foreign policy problems that remain unresolved from Andropov's brief tenure. His initial pronouncements as General Secretary suggest that he supports his predecessor's general policy outline and intends to continue along the same general path in both foreign and domestic spheres. In terms of US-Soviet relations, Chernenko is on record as favoring a US-Soviet dialogue and could give an impetus to some movement in that direction. Chernenko's views are likely to

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be modified as he attempts to gain more support and even further altered by the broader perspective of his new post and the exigencies of international events. [redacted]

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In a more general sense, however, we are uncertain about the nature of the new regime. We question how firm the coalition is that picked Chernenko and we don't know his mandate. At first there was scant reference by Defense Minister Ustinov to the new General Secretary and the initial treatment of Chernenko by the military paper Krasnaya Zvezda was lukewarm. [redacted]

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Moreover, if his selection represents the "old guard's" emphasis on continuity, especially on domestic issues, the younger members of the Politburo could contest the old guard's unwillingness to rock the boat. We see the possibility, therefore, of overt politicking and disagreement among the Soviet leaders in the days ahead. [redacted]

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The New Leader

Chernenko Gets the Nod. The political rise of Konstantin Chernenko--Brezhnev's former aide and close confidant--into the upper ranks of the leadership was especially rapid under Brezhnev. Between April 1976 and November 1978 Chernenko was promoted three times and became one of four top leaders in the hierarchy. He is the only one of the four still in power today (Brezhnev and Mikhail Suslov are dead; Kirilenko is retired). After Suslov's death in 1982, Brezhnev gave a further boost to Chernenko's career by signaling his intention to make him the heir apparent. This plan did not work then, however. [redacted]

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[redacted] Chernenko lost the contest with Andropov by a small margin. His career then appeared to be on hold until two months before the death of Andropov on 9 February 1984. [redacted]

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We do not know what political tradeoffs may have been made in order for Chernenko to get the nod and what factions have now been formed in the Politburo. This time, however, Chernenko apparently benefited from the reluctance of the old guard--Nikolay Tikhonov, Andrey Gromyko, and Dmitriy Ustinov--to pick a younger candidate. Defense Minister Ustinov, the only other senior leader who realistically might have been chosen by the old guard, may not have wanted the job, may have health problems, may have been considered indispensable in his current position, and may have preferred to play the role of power broker, rather than seek the post himself. Moreover, without a seat on the Secretariat he lacked the institutional base that all previous successors held. Ustinov thus would have found it more difficult

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to line up support from the provincial party apparatus and the economic ministries and garner support from Politburo members (e.g. Tikhonov and Kunayev) who represent these interests. [redacted]

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The old guard, especially Ustinov and Gromyko, probably found Chernenko less threatening to their political careers and policy commitments than the younger alternatives in the Secretariat--Mikhail Gorbachev and Grigoriy Romanov. The senior members of the Politburo probably considered Gorbachev at 52, too young and lacking experience for the job. The more experienced 61-year-old Romanov, who moved from Leningrad to his post in Moscow less than a year ago, probably had not had enough time to build the required power base in the capital, and may have seen his best political interests served by siding with Chernenko, rather than see the job go to his younger rival Gorbachev. The Politburo, moreover, may have been wary of picking the strong-willed and ambitious Romanov. [redacted]

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Chernenko also probably was supported by former and present regional leaders on the Politburo, who may have supported him last time. These would include Kazakh Party leader Dinmukhamed Kunayev, a strong supporter of Brezhnev, and former Azerbaijan Party chief Geydar Aliyev, a politically ambitious independent, whose own interests would be best served by keeping the job from a younger leader. Even Vladimir Shcherbitskiy (the Ukrainian leader) and Viktor Grishin (the Moscow leader), both of whom may have aspirations for the General Secretary post, may have sided with Chernenko. Shcherbitskiy's reputed support for Andropov in the previous succession contest did not benefit him politically, and he may have refused to support Andropov's probable choice, Gorbachev. In the March election speeches, such regional leaders as Kunayev, Grishin and Eduard Shevardnadze (the Georgian leader) were particularly supportive of Chernenko, while some of the Moscow-based leaders were less effusive. [redacted]

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Thus, despite the delayed announcement, it is possible that Chernenko got the nod without much of a contest, although various political deals and tradeoffs were probably required to smooth the way for him. Precisely what bargains were struck may become more evident in the coming weeks. [redacted]

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Strengths. Chernenko has long had important political assets even though both Soviet and Western observers have disparaged him. For example, Chernenko never lost his ranking as party second-in-command during Andropov's tenure. Indeed, his position was often highlighted under Andropov, such as when he occupied center place on the podium at the November anniversary celebration. He continued to influence policy and

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decisionmaking--perhaps even more so as Andropov's health worsened in the fall of 1983. Having worked for 10 years behind the scenes as the leadership's top administrative officer, Chernenko probably has considerable support at the Central Committee level--a factor that he seemed to underscore by his direct address of oblast party first secretaries (who comprise the core of the Central Committee) in his first speech as General Secretary. His control of the paper flow and his access to Brezhnev put him in a good position to handle special requests, solve problems, and show favor to oblast officials. The recent Supreme Soviet election speeches also suggest that Chernenko has strong support from regional party bureaucrats. [REDACTED]

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Presumably taking advantage of Andropov's illness, Chernenko was able to use his position to promote his own cause. This was apparent in several instances: he signed two obituaries in Pravda in January that normally would not be signed by the ideology secretary and his signature appeared ahead of others and out of the usual protocol sequence. In the recent nominations for the Supreme Soviet, Chernenko received the second highest number after Andropov. Moreover, in late January and early February the Soviet media gave particular prominence to Chernenko's second volume of speeches and articles. [REDACTED]

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Chernenko also possesses personal attributes that have stood him in good stead in the Soviet political context and will likely continue to do so. For example, he possesses an excellent knowledge of the functioning of the party. As an intimate of Brezhnev and second-in-command under Andropov he has had good access to information and familiarity with important issues. According to a West German official responsible for Soviet affairs, Chernenko possesses a good sense of priorities, including those involving international issues. [REDACTED]

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US officials who met with Chernenko during Andropov's funeral reported that he seemed politically shrewd and self-confident and that he acted with complete authority. West European leaders who met Chernenko said he conveyed an impression of cordiality and reasonableness. Chernenko has long been thought of as a team player and capable apparatchik (party bureaucrat); this has undoubtedly contributed to his acceptance within the consensual style of the Politburo. While Chernenko's knowledge of foreign affairs has been limited, he has scored high marks in personal, one-on-one diplomatic meetings. [REDACTED]

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As "Second" Secretary under Andropov. When Chernenko was passed over as General Secretary in November 1982, he made the best out of his situation. He appeared supportive of Andropov, nominating him for the General Secretary post at the plenum in November 1982. According to a senior Soviet official, Chernenko in fact supported many aspects of Andropov's policies--a view that is reinforced by Chernenko's statements and articles in the Soviet press--particularly on the need to improve ideological and economic discipline. [redacted]

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[redacted] Chernenko attempted to assert his independence and authority on personnel matters under Andropov, but to little avail. Chernenko has modest credentials in the area of foreign affairs and perhaps as a result, did not seek to interfere in the conduct of foreign policy under Andropov. [redacted]

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Chernenko's continuing influence--increasing as Andropov's health deteriorated--was suggested by the regime's endorsement of some of the policies that had been associated with him in the past. The Andropov regime's practice of publicizing Politburo agendas was a decision that bears Chernenko's mark. The Politburo's attention to citizens' letters of complaint to the party--which was mentioned at the Politburo's first publicized meeting and signaled the beginning of the discipline campaign--also seems to have resulted from his efforts. The Politburo's concern with raising the quality of education and its approval of a national program to improve consumer goods and services--goals long advocated by Chernenko--appeared to reflect his influence. [redacted]

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Nevertheless, there may have been some significant policy differences between Andropov and Chernenko and these disagreements could resurface during the latter's tenure. [redacted]

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[redacted] Chernenko was pushing for greater attention to investment in the civilian economy and a concerted effort to improve the standard of living, even if this had a negative impact on the growth of the military budget. His 2 March election speech suggests he is not eager to increase defense spending. This contrasts with the high priority accorded defense in recent speeches by others, notably Defense Minister Ustinov and Foreign Minister Gromyko. [redacted]

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Even so, Chernenko's speech did appear to reflect his colleagues' sensitivities. At a Politburo meeting before his

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election speech the Soviet media indicated that Chernenko had placed consumer welfare before defense needs in remarks to that body. In his election speech, however, Chernenko merely noted that the international situation had compelled the Soviet Union to divert resources into defense. [REDACTED]

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Power and Position. At least at the outset it appears that Chernenko's coalition is more fragile than was apparent during Andropov's brief tenure. The coalition that backed Chernenko may not have been based on anything more than the need to select him over others and the reasons probably vary among coalition members. Chernenko does not seem to have been selected on the basis of a political platform. In his "inaugural" speech Chernenko promised to use "collective" efforts to advance the work begun by Andropov, but it was the older members of the Politburo who played the predominant roles in all the public ceremonies held since Andropov died. Tikhonov, rather than one of the younger party secretaries, nominated Chernenko for the General Secretary post at the party plenum that selected him. Moreover, Chernenko, Tikhonov, Ustinov, and Gromyko stood at the forefront of the leadership during the lying-in-state of Andropov, and the eulogies were delivered by Chernenko, Ustinov and Gromyko. These members of the old guard--and Tikhonov --were the only Politburo members to hold discussions with visiting Warsaw Pact leaders. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] the Soviet regime will continue to rule by consensus with the veteran Gromyko singled out as having a very strong influence on foreign policy. [REDACTED]

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Consolidation of Power. Andropov was able to begin his consolidation of power by filling a large number of important vacancies in key posts (e.g. industry party secretary, KGB Chief representation on the Politburo and the Chairman of the Party Control Committee). Chernenko does not have such vacancies to fill. Chernenko, moreover, does not seem to have the power to remove his opponents. Nevertheless, at least one person should be moved to the Secretariat to fill a vacancy on that body created by Chernenko's move up. This could be a politically contentious issue, one that others in the leadership will look at with an eye on the future because a new addition to the Secretariat could affect their relative standing on it. [REDACTED]

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The presence of two younger and ambitious Politburo members in the Secretariat will also complicate Chernenko's task. Gorbachev as second in importance on the Secretariat will play a prominent role in this regard. Soviet media reported an address by Gorbachev to the Central Committee plenum that elected Chernenko to be General Secretary, and a Central Committee

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official told [] at Andropov's funeral that Gorbachev is now "unofficial" second secretary. Judging from the order in which the top leaders gave their March Supreme Soviet election speeches, Gorbachev is the senior secretary under Chernenko. Nevertheless, the official media initially downplayed Gorbachev's participation in leadership activity at the plenum, and a Soviet source contends that he is destined for a new job outside the Secretariat (e.g. as Premier), which suggests that Gorbachev's position has yet to be worked out. On balance, the fact that Gorbachev's remarks were publicized--although belatedly--his position next to Chernenko at Andropov's bier, and the schedule of his election speech tend to support the view that he ranks number two in the Secretariat. This "choice," however probably was part of a compromise--which could prove only temporary. To protect his own position Chernenko may try to use Romanov as a counter balance, assuming that Gorbachev stays in place. []

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Liabilities. Age, health problems and an apparent lack of support from some quarters are important liabilities of the new party General Secretary. Some in the Soviet bureaucracy believe that he is a transitional leader, according to remarks Soviets officials have recently made to US counterparts. His ability to fully consolidate power and move on policy will be made more difficult if such a perception takes hold generally. Moreover, the younger, more ambitious aspirants for the top job may seek to utilize this perception to build-up support for themselves as succession candidates. []

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Just before Brezhnev's death in 1982 Chernenko had been the subject of unflattering remarks by Soviets who passed on disparaging comments about Chernenko while they touted Andropov. Some slighting of Chernenko was also apparent among a few Soviets after Chernenko became party leader. []

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[], the Soviet Ambassador to Czechoslovakia, who attended the plenum that approved him, was unenthusiastic in describing the new party chief to the US Ambassador. A Soviet Ambassador in Latin America reportedly called Chernenko unqualified because of his lack of foreign policy experience. []

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[] Should a deliberate deprecation of his leadership abilities take hold among Soviets who have access to foreigners, however, he could be forced into taking disciplinary actions designed to stop it. []

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There were variations in the way the press first handled the leadership change, which suggested that the military in particular was not enamored of Chernenko's selection. At first Chernenko was lauded in an editorial in the government paper, but Pravda was more restrained in praising his qualifications, and

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the military's paper ignored them altogether. Moreover, Ustinov's 23 February article in Pravda made scant reference to General Secretary Chernenko. [redacted]

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To judge by the February-March election speeches of Chernenko's Politburo colleagues, the leadership decided to build Chernenko's image as a capable leader and one who is fully supported by the members of the Politburo and their constituents. For example, Ustinov praised Chernenko more than adequately in his election speech. Even so, variations of his treatment continued. Gromyko was particularly cool in his remarks toward Chernenko and a few other leaders were perfunctory in their praise of the new leader. [redacted]

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In the past foreign observers have called Chernenko inept, plodding and a dullard. His earlier role as Brezhnev's right-hand man tended to project the negative image of a Politburo factotum, and his poor public speaking style furthers this image. While all of this suggests that we could continue to receive reports by both Soviet and foreign officials that disparage Chernenko, the more likely course is for the Soviet media and officialdom to boost Chernenko's status. Indeed, Chernenko does have strong support from old-line bureaucrats and it will become increasingly risky for those who are unenthusiastic about his tenure to speak out. Even officials within the security apparatus who may have low regard for Chernenko will have to take their cues from the top. [redacted]

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Foreign Policy Issues

Chernenko's major problem in handling foreign policy issues will be his lack of experience and a difficult foreign policy agenda passed on by Andropov. [redacted]

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- Soviet-US Relations and Arms Control--Chernenko inherits the dilemma Andropov faced in deciding how and when to resume the dialogue with the United States, particularly on nuclear arms negotiations. In concert with Ustinov and Gromyko, Chernenko must decide whether Moscow should return to the bargaining table before or after the Presidential election in the United States. Based on the record of his public statements, Chernenko himself seems to favor the dialogue, and he might favor giving new impetus to some movement in that direction. In his 2 March election speech he suggested that a significant improvement in the bilateral relationship might result if Washington took the initiative on any of several less contentious arms control issues, particularly chemical warfare. [REDACTED]

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A return to the negotiations will not indicate willingness to alter basic Soviet arms control proposals. Chernenko probably lacks the political power and the freedom of action to attempt dramatic new initiatives or make abrupt policy changes--even if inclined to do so. The regime is thus likely to continue to resist US proposals that it believes would result in substantial cuts in significant elements of the strategic nuclear forces. [REDACTED]

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The most pressing arms control issue is INF. The regime is likely to continue with military counterdeployments in order to convince the West that it has gained nothing by its Pershing II deployments. With some new or additional weapons systems deployed opposite Western Europe and near US territory by mid-year, however, the regime might feel that it can afford to return to the negotiating table. [REDACTED]

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- China--Only significant Soviet concessions affecting Afghanistan, Kampuchea or Moscow's military posture in Mongolia and along the Sino-Soviet border would open up the prospect of a major improvement in Sino-Soviet ties. The constraints on Chernenko at home and abroad--particularly Moscow's relationship with Vietnam--argue against any early movement in this direction. Nevertheless, Chernenko is in a position to pursue bilateral relations in such less critical areas as economic and cultural ties, where the Chinese are showing greater receptivity to Soviet overtures. [REDACTED]

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- ° Afghanistan--The inability of Moscow to reduce the Afghan insurgency is one of its most intractable problems, but the costs of alternative strategies are quite high. Just before Andropov's death the Soviet media indicated that the present approach will continue. Chernenko's failure to meet with Pakistani leader Zia at Andropov's funeral also suggests no early Soviet initiative on Afghanistan, which contrasts sharply with Andropov's meeting with Zia at the Brezhnev funeral and the Soviet look of flexibility at that time. [redacted]

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- ° Middle East--The removal of the US military presence from Lebanon and the Syrian diplomatic victory there helps to compensate for the damage done to the Soviet position in the wake of the Israeli invasion in 1982. A Syrian-Israeli war, however, would test Moscow's commitment to a key Arab client. Moscow has no interest in a wider war and will likely attempt to constrain provocative Syrian actions. It is nonetheless conceivable that the Soviets might look for ways to expand their presence in Syria or provide more sophisticated weaponry if they believe they might otherwise lose out on the next phase of discussions on a general Arab-Israeli settlement. The current level of fighting between Iran and Iraq does not pose a difficult problem for the new regime and it probably will continue to sit on the fence. We believe that, barring a US military invasion of Iran, the Soviets would not commit their own forces to the fight. We do not believe that the Soviets would intervene if the US conducted bombing raids against Iranian ships or airbases. [redacted]

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- ° Africa--The most serious problems in Africa facing the new leadership are the threats posed to the Marxist regimes in Angola and Mozambique by South-African-backed insurgent groups. Over the past year, the Soviets have stepped up their military assistance to Luanda--a tack the new leadership is likely to continue. Despite Angola's growing dependence on Soviet arms and Cuban troops, Moscow is probably concerned that US-brokered talks between Angola and South Africa may adversely effect Soviet interests in the region. The Soviets are opposed to linking Cuban withdrawal from Angola to a political settlement on Namibia. In Mozambique, insurgency and economic deterioration have prompted the Machel regime to accept an accommodation with Pretoria. The loss of influence in Mozambique will provide greater incentive to hang on

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in Angola by providing greater amounts of military assistance. [redacted]

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- ° Latin America--Although the Soviets are faced with problems in the region, there are now no critical situations for Soviet foreign policy. Chernenko met with Castro during Andropov's funeral and gave unusual attention to Cuba in his 2 March election speech. His election remarks, in which he criticized US pressure on Havana and promised that Moscow would be "on Cuba's side" in "fair weather and in storm" suggest that there were some frictions with Castro over the downfall of the Marxist regime in Grenada that needed to be smoothed over. Chernenko probably wanted to ensure that these do not interfere with the joint Soviet-Cuban effort to bolster the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The regime will probably continue to give Nicaragua military assistance and some economic aid, but will eschew any high profile involvement which could trigger a strong US response against the Sandinistas. Authoritative Soviet statements before Andropov's death suggested that Moscow does not want to create a new "economic dependent" in Latin America or to unnecessarily complicate US-Soviet relations by expanding activities in the region. [redacted]

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On the Domestic Front

Chernenko's initial remarks as General Secretary suggest a continuation of Andropov's domestic policy line. He endorsed the programs emphasized by Andropov--the economic experiment in industry, the use of labor brigades, and measures to improve consumer services--and affirmed the need to maintain labor discipline. Chernenko's concern with building his political base, however, is likely to mean that he will make a sharper distinction than Andropov did between the discipline campaign and the campaign against corruption, which party and government officials probably find threatening. In the near term, it is questionable whether Chernenko will have the political strength to push through new economic programs. By emphasizing continuity, therefore, he may be making a virtue out of political necessity. [redacted]

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Since Chernenko's past statements do not suggest a completely defined or comprehensive economic program, it is difficult to ascertain his approach to the economy over the long run. Nevertheless, his speeches and articles suggest his policy inclinations on the following issues:

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- ° Consumer Well-Being--Chernenko has strongly urged more attention to consumer welfare and corresponding increases in the availability of consumer goods. He has spoken out in favor of Brezhnev's Food Program and has made efforts to cultivate the image of a leader attuned to popular aspirations by calling for commissions to study public opinion, more intraparty democracy, and greater attention to letters from the rank and file. His pro-consumer stance could prompt him to push for some redirection of investment toward consumer goods and services--but that would entail some political risk for him in view of the current international situation.
- ° Management Reform--There is nothing in Chernenko's background that indicates he will be inclined toward bold systemic change that would significantly reduce centralized planning or management. He apparently prefers, however, regional to ministerial organization and spoke out in favor of the district agro-industrial associations developed under the Food Program. In 1982 he attacked the autonomy of the ministries which he said "eats away like rust at the economic mechanism." He also appears to prefer a more clearly defined role for the party in economic management for greater accountability.
- ° Regional Investment--Chernenko has defended the cause of minority republics in their struggle for investment resources and he could continue to be an advocate. An early political base for Chernenko's support has come from these republics and he needs the support of regional leaders to consolidate his political position. Nonetheless, support for the regions cuts both ways politically. While he could strengthen his support in the republics, he could lose support at the center. [redacted]

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Current Status and Prospects

Soviets have already begun publicizing the trappings of Chernenko's new authority. According to foreign diplomats who attended the Soviet Armed Forces reception on 23 February, for example, Chief of the General Staff Ogarkov referred to Chernenko as head of the Defense Council. The reference was made in the presence of foreigners, but it has not appeared in the official press. If and when the Soviet media mentions this other position held by Chernenko, and how it is done, it will give some further indication of his leadership status. Andropov's title was mentioned by Ustinov in Pravda several months after he had become party leader. [redacted]

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Leadership speeches for the March elections to the Supreme Soviet tended to build up General Secretary Chernenko's image, but with differing degrees of support. Gorbachev spoke at great length, but focused on Chernenko's "theoretical" contribution and said nothing about his leadership qualities. Gromyko was particularly cool, and RSFSR Premier Vorotnikov was notably perfunctory in his praise of Chernenko. Ustinov praised Chernenko but stopped far short of Romanov and Moscow party chief Grishin, who were the most effusive. Soviet media indicate that the election meetings to which they spoke adopted resolutions that described the Politburo as "headed by" Chernenko--an honorific formulation that had been used sparingly under Brezhnev and Andropov. The meeting that Premier Tikhonov addressed adopted the same resolutions. [REDACTED]

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An important indication of Chernenko's power will be his ability to assume Andropov's post as Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet (Soviet president). Both Brezhnev and Andropov added this title to that of party General Secretary, although it took Brezhnev years rather than months to gain it. Should someone other than Chernenko become Soviet president, it would be a clear sign that Chernenko is sharing power to a greater degree than his immediate predecessor did. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] a Supreme Soviet session could be convened as early as April which would be the first opportunity for the selection of a president. A party plenum is likely to precede the spring Supreme Soviet session, which would be an early gauge of how Chernenko is doing. We would look to how the Soviet media--and other leaders--refer to Chernenko at these meetings. Moreover, a shift of the responsibilities of the members of the Secretariat and Politburo might be evident before the plenum. The addition of a member to the Secretariat or to the Politburo would provide further clues on the relative standing of Chernenko and others in the leadership. [REDACTED]

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In terms of policy, Chernenko's Supreme Soviet election speech reflected a commitment to the Soviet consumer and nonpolemic approach to Soviet-US relations. Nevertheless, Chernenko's views insofar as we can discern them, gives us at best a general sense of the direction Soviet policy will take under the new leader. [REDACTED]

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